

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS – EDUCATION APRIL 16, 2024

Responses to Tabled Questions

Question 1: Page 14

Ms. Pillipow: Just so I'm clear, I'm looking at the five-year end rate for students. It was 73.1 per cent in our annual report for 2017-2018. You're asking why we didn't set a new rate? Is there any more technical advice that you would provide on the performance metric and why we wouldn't change it? We look at the data over a series of this reporting period, and then we would recalculate using the formulas that we have from our Treasury Board and Finance colleagues. I'm just going to check with my finance team. Is there any more technical advice that you would provide on the performance metric and why we wouldn't change it?

Mr. Hanif: Will you be able to table that to the committee?

Mr. Willan: We can provide that in writing after if you wish.

Response

- Performance targets are a key component of the Education business plan as they help establish performance expectations for the next three fiscal years. Performance targets are set to improve performance over time, rather than maintain the status quo. Targets are usually set greater than the last actual results available.
- In 2022/23, the High School Completion Rate of self-identified First Nations, Métis and Inuit students was 71.3 per cent, which exceeded the target set for the year.
 - In the 2022–25 Business Plan, the target of 68.5 per cent was set when the last available actual result in 2020/21 was 68.0 per cent.
 - Results have improved by 6.8 per cent since 2017/18. The data for this measure lags by one year and results reflect the 2021/22 school year.
- Target setting involves collecting and analyzing historical and related data to track trends and monitor progress toward achieving results. Targets are set based on an analysis of past and current performance and projected results. To ensure comparability and consistency of results from year-to-year, the methodology used to gather data, as well as set targets, is consistent from one reporting period to the next. Targets are set to be aspirational, but realistic and achievable.

Question 2: Page 20

These are based on page 16. "Alberta school authorities have had access to \$1.2 billion in support to mitigate pandemic-related challenges," is the wording that was used. What is the period of time school authorities have had access to this \$1.2 billion? Any criteria? Please list any criteria school authorities have to meet to access this \$1.2 billion. Where did the \$1.2 billion come from? How much of this is new money? And if you could even point to a line item and a breakdown of how and where the funds were distributed if you have that information. The ministry outlined the purpose of the accessible \$1.2 billion on page 16, identifying mental health, wellness, and addressing learning disruptions and gaps. What evaluation matrix, targets, or metrics were put in place to evaluate outcomes of the targeted investment, and how much specifically was identified for mental health?

Response

School authorities had access to the following funds in support to mitigate pandemic-related challenges:

Pandemic support	Fiscal Year	Amount (\$ in millions)	Criteria for Funding
Federal Per Student Funding <i>(Federal Support)</i>	2020/21	\$263	<p>On August 26, 2020, the Government of Canada announced a new program to provide funding of up to \$2 billion to the provinces and territories to support a safe return to class this fall. Alberta's share was \$262.8 million.</p> <p>\$250.8 million was flowed to all school authorities, including school jurisdictions (public, separate, francophone and charters) and accredited funded private schools, through a \$350 per student grant.</p> <p>\$12 million was used to accommodate school authorities experiencing large enrolment growth in their online programs or other challenges related to the return to in-class programming.</p>
Government Support for Critical Workers <i>(Federal Support)</i>	2020/21	\$43	<p>The critical worker benefit recognizes their determination to go above and beyond for Alberta's students.</p> <p>Thousands of education workers who helped deliver critical services to Alberta students during the pandemic were recognized with a one-time payment of \$1,200.</p> <p>Educational/teacher assistants, bus drivers, custodians/janitors and school secretarial-related lower-wage positions were among those eligible, but must meet specific eligibility requirements to receive the benefit.</p>
Accelerated capital maintenance and renewal funding <i>(Provincial Support)</i>	2020/21	\$250	Only public, separate, francophone and charter school jurisdictions had access to the accelerated capital maintenance and renewal funding.
Provincial funding for Personal Protective Equipment <i>(Provincial Support)</i>	2020-21	\$10	Government provided personal protective equipment to school authorities.
COVID-19 Mitigation Funding <i>(Provincial Support)</i>	2020-21	\$130	This funding was to mitigate decreases in operational funding due to enrolment decreases by providing over \$130 million to help school authorities maintain teachers and support staff, allow school authorities to follow

			health measures and incorporate enhanced cleaning protocols. School authorities with enrolment decline due to the pandemic were automatically eligible for this funding.
Learning disruption interventions <i>(Provincial Support)</i>	2021-22	\$45	All school authorities were eligible for learning disruption funding to provide intervention programming for students at-risk of falling behind grade level in numeracy and literacy due to closure of schools during the pandemic. The school authorities were required to complete application forms and specify the number of assessed Grade 1 to 3 students behind grade level.
Access to taxpayer-funded operating reserves	2021-22	\$464	School jurisdictions with operating reserve balances were eligible to access their operating reserves. Access to reserves require board approval.
Total		\$1,205	

- Excluding operating reserves, pandemic support funding was new to the Education system and provided in the 2021/22 and 2022/23 fiscal years.
- Over \$900 million of the available \$1.2 billion was flexible and available to support mental health, wellness and to addressing learning disruptions and gaps, as the Alberta government respects the autonomy of school authorities to manage their resources to reflect local priorities while making the best use of public funds for students.
 - Federal Government Support for Critical Workers Benefit and provincial funding for Personal Protective Equipment was targeted support, and accelerated capital maintenance and renewal funding supported capital projects.
- In Budget 2022, Alberta Education took the findings and recommendations from the Child and Youth Well Being review and targeted funding of \$110 million over three years to support students experiencing academic challenges and to create school environments supporting student well-being and positive mental health.

Evaluation of Mental Health in Schools Pilot

- In 2022, in addition to the designated \$1.2 billion in pandemic-related support, Alberta Education committed approximately \$50 million over three years to establish approximately 80 mental health pilot projects in schools across the province; targeted funding was expanded to help school authorities support students experiencing academic challenges and to promote student well-being and positive mental health.
- The Assurance Framework for schools and school authorities assess progress and success.
 - The framework has five assurance areas with related performance measures that enable schools and school authorities to show their communities how they are performing each year.
 - The assurance area the Mental Health in Schools Pilot leveraged was the Learning Supports Domain and the responsibility for school authorities to report on student access to a continuum of supports and services.

- Four reporting cycles were embedded within the design of the pilots to support the continuous improvement cycle supported by Alberta Education.
 - This approach helps the province and school authorities track successes and continuously improve the quality of mental health supports and services for students and supports an accountable and responsive education system.

Question 3: Page 20

"Next, on curriculum. How does the ministry evaluate the curriculum implementation plan, and how is the new curriculum effectiveness evaluated against student success? How does the ministry expect the new curriculum to impact high school completion? That's a reference from page 25."

Response

How does the ministry evaluate the curriculum implementation plan?

- Since implementation began in September 2022, Alberta Education has collected feedback from education stakeholders on supports and timelines for implementation through a variety of formats, including:
 - an implementation supports feedback form completed by teachers and system leaders;
 - feedback discussions during education stakeholder engagements;
 - attending Alberta Teachers' Association conferences;
 - stakeholder emails; and
 - [New.LearnAlberta.ca](https://www.learnalberta.ca) usage statistics.
- Based on stakeholder feedback, improvements have been made to the availability of resources and to increase awareness of supports for implementation.

How is the new curriculum effectiveness evaluated against student success?

- It takes several years for students to move through the new curriculum and be assessed appropriately to determine success in achieving the learning outcomes.
- The new Kindergarten to Grade 6 curriculum has an intentional focus on numeracy and literacy, as these build strong foundations for students as they move through the curriculum in all grades. Literacy and numeracy screening assessments are available in Kindergarten to Grade 4 to help teachers monitor and track literacy and numeracy achievement throughout these years.
- Provincial Achievement Tests in Grade 6 are also an important performance measure for Alberta's education system. These standardized tests reflect the essentials that all Alberta students are expected to achieve. Test results assist schools, school authorities and the province in monitoring and improving student learning.
- In response to feedback received from school authorities, Grade 6 Provincial Achievement Tests in English language arts and literature and mathematics will *not* be administered in May and June 2024. In their place, Alberta Education will be fieldtesting newly developed assessments in these subjects. Field testing will take place between April and June 2024.
- School authorities have been strongly encouraged to participate in this field testing, which provides Alberta Education with data to inform the design of future Provincial Achievement Tests and ensure students receive a fair and reliable assessment to support their future success.

How does the ministry expect the new curriculum to impact high school completion?

- The updated curriculum will provide students with essential knowledge and skills to better prepare them for the future. The curriculum includes core competencies, which are the

combinations of knowledge, skills and characteristics that students develop and apply for successful learning, living and working.

- Alberta's new curriculum will help prepare our students for a rapidly changing labour market – with an ever-increasing premium on adaptability and transferrable skills – and will set them on the best path for success within the classroom and beyond.
- Recognizing the timeline for renewed Kindergarten to Grade 6 curriculum has been adjusted, the work to develop curriculum for future grades will be sequenced accordingly.
- As part of our current engagement activities, feedback has been collected from education partners to help inform decisions on future timelines for implementation of other subjects and grades.

Question 4: Page 20

"The partnership with Junior Achievement was renewed for three years to train teachers to provide K to 6 students with financial literacy programming. I note that the ministry anticipates this will only reach 9,000 students. What evaluation was used to support a three-year extension? How much is the total value of the three-year renewal? Why is the number of 9,000 so small?"

Response

What evaluation was used to support a three-year extension?

- Assessment of an extension to the term of the agreement with Junior Achievement considered a variety of factors and data points, including:
 - Student, teacher and volunteer evaluation surveys have indicated a high level of satisfaction of Junior Achievement programs and learner outcome results.
 - Junior Achievement continues to implement these evaluation tools to measure learner outcomes and educator satisfaction in addition to the measurement of growth of overall student participation:
 - working with students in urban and rural communities serving over 120 communities across the province;
 - provision of French-language programming;
 - working with Indigenous communities and urban schools where there is a high population of Indigenous youth to deliver a suite of Indigenous financial literacy and work readiness programs;
 - through community partnerships such as United Way, Boys and Girls Clubs and Big Brothers and Big Sisters, Junior Achievement makes programming available to students from at-risk backgrounds; and
 - a robust Indigenous engagement program that allows Indigenous leaders to interact with students in their communities, which has had a profound impact on attendance and entrepreneurial spirit in southern Alberta.

How much is the total value of the three-year renewal?

- The total grant funding for the additional three years is \$825,000, with an end date of August 31, 2025.
 - Grant funding by year:
 - 2022 for \$250,000;
 - 2023 for \$325,000; and
 - 2024 for \$250,000.

Why is the number of 9,000 so small?

- The conditional grant proposal that was approved indicated a minimum target reach of 9,375 Kindergarten to Grade 6 students for programming focused on financial literacy, entrepreneurship and work readiness.
 - Based on their 2022/23 final report, Junior Achievement exceeded their minimum target reach by 3,135 for a total of 12,510 Kindergarten to Grade 6 students.

Question 5: Page 20

The department set a target of 87 per cent of students, teachers, and parents feel that are schools safe but only achieved 84 per cent. My question is: why is the department not alarmed by this? In fact, WCB claims for violent assaults against staff almost doubled during the reporting period. Why is the department not alarmed by this? The satisfaction with quality of education in schools has gone down from 85 per cent to 79 per cent. Why is the department not alarmed by this? The quality of space has gone down from 81 per cent to 78 per cent. Why is the department not alarmed by this? The sense of belonging among students in schools has gone from 84 per cent to 81 per cent. Why is the department not alarmed by this?

Response

Safe, caring and healthy learning environment

- In 2022/23, 84 per cent of students, parents, teachers and school board members agreed that schools provide a safe, caring and healthy learning environment.
- The results are still high, but will be best viewed against future results, taken in context with government strategies, policies and initiatives designed to support students on multiple fronts, including addressing mental health and wellness, supporting those with complex learning needs and ensuring safe, caring and healthy learning environments.
- The surveying related to the 2021/22 results occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have impacted results.
- To ensure Alberta’s students have safe, caring and healthy learning environments, the ministry expanded targeted funding to \$110 million over three years to enable schools to support students experiencing academic challenges and create school environments that support student well-being and positive mental health.
- In 2022/23, targeted funding of \$40 million was made available to support mental health pilot projects in schools, provide learning loss support for students and increase children’s and students’ access to specialized assessments by qualified professionals.

Quality of Kindergarten to Grade 12 education

- Overall survey results in 2022/23 indicate 79 per cent of high school students, parents, teachers, school board members and the public were satisfied with the overall quality of Kindergarten to Grade 12 education.
- Alberta Education has many initiatives to improve the quality of Kindergarten to Grade 12 education, including:
 - Maintaining a well-governed and managed Alberta education system by:
 - enabling schools to support students experiencing academic challenges and create school environments that support student well-being and positive mental health;
 - supporting choice with a variety of schooling options for students and parents within the education system;
 - developing and implementing strategies and plans for maintaining and assessing the need for school capital projects; and

- reducing red tape and increasing assurance for parents, schools and operators by streamlining financial and governance practices for private schools and private Early Childhood Services operators.

Learning Space

- Overall survey results in 2022/23 indicate that 78 per cent of high school students, parents, teachers and school board members were satisfied that the learning space in schools meets the needs of students.
- To ensure that learning space in schools meets the needs of students:
 - Alberta Education provides funding to maintain and renew schools and collaborates with the Ministry of Infrastructure on planning to build and modernize schools.
 - The 2022 Capital Plan included \$2 billion over three years on school infrastructure to support the building, replacement and modernization of 15 schools, including new schools in Calgary, Edmonton and Camrose.
 - Additional funding for school infrastructure included:
 - \$47 million towards collegiate schools and charter school expansion;
 - \$209 million in Capital Maintenance and Renewal funding that supported approximately 1,000 Capital Maintenance and Renewal projects for 64 school authorities; and
 - \$667 million in Operations and Maintenance funding to address the maintenance of school buildings and to ensure safe and well-maintained schools for students.
 - This includes \$580.7 million to help school jurisdictions address rising cost pressures, including utilities, contracts and supplies, faced by school jurisdictions; and
 - \$86.5 million in Infrastructure Maintenance and Renewal funding.

Sense of Belonging

- Overall survey results in 2022/23 indicate that 81 per cent of high school students, parents and teachers agreed that students feel like they belong and are supported to be successful in their learning.
- Alberta Education continues to promote inclusive education where diversity and learner differences are embraced and equitable learning opportunities are available.
 - In February 2023, a \$126 million three-year investment was announced to address classroom complexity. The funds will support students in accessing learning resources, including teachers and educational assistants. A total of \$42 million was allocated for each year.
 - An investment of up to \$10 million per year for 2022/23 and 2023/24 supported increased access to specialized assessments. Specialized assessments, made by qualified professionals including speech language pathologists, physical therapists, occupational therapists or psychologists, help identify students who could benefit from targeted supports. As of March 31, 2023, a total of 3,500 referrals have been made for specialized assessments.
 - A Mental Health in School Pilot was established to encourage student well-being through supports and services, including counselling, social and emotional learning, student assessment, family- and parent-oriented supports, and training for school staff.

Question 6: Page 20

The school nutrition pilot program was reintroduced in 2022-23, with \$3 million being allocated to it. The program provided up to \$500,000 in grant funding to nonprofit organizations to

collaborate with school jurisdictions. Can the department share the results of this pilot program and how the outcomes were measured?

Response

- Outcomes of the pilot are posted publicly on [Alberta.ca](https://www.alberta.ca) and include:
 - An additional 43 schools were served and an average of 2,868 additional students per day were fed during the pilot year;
 - All participating non-profit organizations collaborated with at least two, and up to four, school authorities within one region;
 - Innovations and efficiencies found by non-profit organizations in reducing costs per meal were offset by inflation and rising food costs; and
 - School authorities desire flexibility in how they deliver school nutrition programming.
- While there were several noted successes, drawbacks were also reported:
 - Participating school authorities indicated a strong preference to retain control of nutrition funding and decision-making; and
 - There is no current nonprofit organization or group of nonprofit organizations that could deliver the School Nutrition Program for the entire province.

Question 7: Page 20

In 2022-23 Alberta Education provided school authorities with an additional \$21 million through a new supplemental enrolment growth grant. How did this additional funding support the education system through higher-than-expected growth? Was it successful, and what metrics were used to track its success?

Response

- As a result of higher actual enrolment growth than projected growth in the 2022/23 school year, the department introduced the Supplemental Enrolment Growth Grant to address school authority's funding concerns.
- The grant provided additional funding to school authorities based on their percentage of enrolment growth, with \$1,500 per student allocated for growth between two and five per cent and \$3,000 per student allocated for growth greater than five per cent.
- The Supplemental Enrolment Growth Grant supported school authorities to address immediate staffing pressures, additional costs associated with more students and help minimize impacts to student learning due to the rapid, unexpected enrolment growth.
- The Supplemental Enrolment Growth Grant is flexible funding. Government respects the autonomy of school authorities to manage their resources and make hiring decisions that reflect local priorities, while making the best use of public funds for students.

Question 8:

I see on page 42 of the report that "Alberta Education continues to support the growth and development of the teaching workforce through several teacher certificate and bursary programs as well as agreements with education partners." One of the programs listed is the northern student teacher bursary program. The report states that "in 2022-23, the NSTB Program awarded 29 students with 45 bursaries for a total of \$324,000, generating up to 74 years of returned teaching service in northern Alberta schools." Great news.

Can you go more in depth about this program and how it has helped to address teacher shortages in northern Alberta during the 2022-23 fiscal year?

Response

- In 2009, to support the attraction and retention of certificated teachers in northern Alberta school authorities, Alberta Education developed the Northern Student Teacher Bursary Program.
 - Alberta Education partnered with the Northern Alberta Development Council, under Jobs, Economy and Trade, to administer the bursary program.
- The program provides bursaries to Bachelor of Education students who agree to return service as a teacher in a northern Alberta school district.
 - Bursary recipients in their second last year of a teacher education program receive \$16,000 over two years in exchange for three years of return-of-service in the north.
 - Bursary recipients in their last year of a teacher education program receive \$8,000 in exchange for two years of return of service in the north.
- Bursary recipients can return service at schools within the boundaries of the Northern Alberta Development Council, which include 21 northern public and separate school divisions, in addition to First Nations and private schools within these boundaries.
- During the 2022/23 fiscal year, the following school authorities benefitted from two years of return-of-service from bursary recipients:
 - Aspen View School Division;
 - Fort McMurray School Division;
 - Grande Prairie School Division;
 - High Prairie School Division;
 - Holy Family Catholic Separate School Division;
 - Lakeland Roman Catholic Separate School Division;
 - Living Waters Catholic Separate School Division;
 - Northland School Division; and
 - Peace River School Division.
- For the 2022/23 fiscal year, bursary recipients who received the \$8,000 bursary in their last year of a Bachelor of Education degree program began their return-of-service commitment in fall 2023.
- The return-of-service commitment supports graduates so that they can experience living and working in northern Alberta communities, while allowing school leaders to address teacher shortages and promote employment opportunities in their school or school authority.
- Since the program began, over half of the bursary recipients continued to teach in northern Alberta after their return-of-service commitment was complete.